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Existentialism in the selected work of Margaret Laurence and Philip Frederick Grove.

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Abstract

The most discussed and the highly argued philosophic thought is existentialism. It is a European phenomenal, discussed much in the writings of French intellectuals. 'Existentialism', fundamentally a philosophy of man, is concerned with an individual person existing in the world, with the problems he has to face in life, with the ways he faces them, with his passions and emotions, above all, with his personal outlook on life. Its definition is thus to some extent one of historical convenience. Existentialism is a catch-all term for those philosophers who consider the nature of the human condition as a key to philosophical problem and who share the view that this problem is best addressed through ontology. Those existentialist philosophers are mostly from the continent of Europe, and belong to 19th and 20th centuries. Outside philosophy, the existentialist movement is probably the most well-known philosophical movement. It has certainly had considerable influence outside philosophy, for example on psychological theory and on the arts. The main focus in this article is of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Philip Frederick Grove's *Our Daily Bread* in connection with existentialism.

Key Words: Existentialism, Philosophy, problem, individual, movement etc.

Introduction

The term existentialism was explicitly adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre, and through the wide dissemination of the post war literary and philosophical output of Sartre and his associates-notably Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus. Existentialism became identified with a cultural movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. It has a relation that relates itself to its own self, is confronted with certain elusiveness. It is a doctrine that makes human life possible and declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity, i.e. "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 349). It is a style that leads those who adopt it to very different convictions about the world and man's life in it. Existential man is often a stranger in a strange world. It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object. He is not only a thinking subject but an imitator of action and a centre of feeling. It is this spectrum of existence that existentialism tries to express.

This kind of philosophy begins from man as an existent. Existentialism can also be defined as the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human existence. To approach existentialism in this categorical way may seem to conceal what is often taken to be its 'heart' namely, its character as a gesture of protest against academic philosophy, its anti-system sensibility, its flight from the 'iron cage' of reason. But while it is true that the major existential philosophers wrote with a passion and urgency rather uncommon in this time, and while the idea that philosophy cannot be practiced in the disinterested manner of an objective science is indeed central to existentialism, it is equally true that all the themes popularly associated with existentialism - dread, boredom, alienation, anguish, freedom, commitment, nothingness, and so on - find their philosophical significance in the context of the search for a new categorical framework, together with its governing norm.

As we read the novels of Grove and Laurence we come across the main characters John Elliot and Hager felt all above mentioned problems in their life. Hager wakes into a new form of awareness on her last morning in the cannery and what she has observed in the scallops becomes a figurative representation of what she now perceives. With the light "stinging" her eyes she reaches a turning point. The eyes that have resembled those of the "sightless" (3) Stone Angel in the Manawaka cemetery now

begins to see, and Hagar realizes: Things never look the same from the outside as they do from the inside. (249)

Even though the protagonist of the novels is aged people but still they long for freedom and commitment. Often they felt loneliness and isolation. English-Canadian fiction provides many examples of fictional old people who get out and away from their house and seek a more natural environment, one in which the image of a circular journey is often associated with what Rooke calls the "formlessness and mobility of the image of water (Rooke 255). Hagar Shipley's journey from her house to an abandoned cannery next to the ocean at Shadow Point is a notable example. Another example occurs in Janette Turner Hospital's short story, "I Saw Three Ships", in which Old Gabe leaves his rooming house to fish by the ocean. Here he is described as "reeling in his past" and thinking, "The whole wheeling world comes back to where it started, there's no help for it" (Isobars 84).

Though existentialism, in its developed form, is a phenomenon of recent times, its roots can be traced far back in the history of philosophy. Existentialist philosophy has brought to explicit awareness an attitude of mind and a way of thinking that are as old as human existence itself. In existentialism, the individual's starting point is characterized by what has been called 'the existential attitude' or a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. Nietzsche says: "Man is his own creation; he is what he makes of himself" (Lehan 1). Many existentialists have also regarded traditional systematic or academic philosophies, in both style and content, as too abstract and remote from concrete human experience. The application of the methods of existential interpretation to mythology has unlocked great areas of meaning and revealed the complexity of archaic man's self-understanding. Even at a pre-philosophical and pre-critical stage of his mental development, man was already pre-occupied with those problems that have come to constitute the major themes of existentialist philosophy- the mystery of existence, finitude, guilt, alienation, despair, death and hope, decision and responsibility, freedom and meaning. These matters constitute the core of personal being.

The link between the creating of a life story in old age and the construction of a work of fiction is not only apparent through the use of the imagination, but also through the use of imagery. When elderly protagonists do undertake an interior journey of the mind, this journey is often mirrored by an actual journey in the course of the novel. Before the journey is undertaken, some of these protagonists are depicted metaphorically as chafing restlessly against the limitations of the "house" they live in. Two of

Frederick Philip Grove's characters fit into this scenario. In *Our Daily Bread* the sixty-eight-year-old John Elliot is portrayed as confined to his house and repeatedly waking up and down one room. From here, he eventually sets out on a solitary journey to the distant homes of his children. Similarly, as we shall soon see, in *The Master of the Mill*, Grove's Sam Clark, an old man in his eighties, is described in the opening paragraph as restlessly pacing up and down a large hall of his house. Sam, too, gets out and away in the regular solitary car rides he takes through "The Loop" outside his home. In a similar way, Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* is also depicted as being confined with a restless energy indoors and eventually breaking out into new paths of awareness. The ninety-year-old Hagar initially describes herself as "stumping around her room, remembering furiously" and as being "rampant with memory" (Laurence 3). Hagar eventually gets away from this room and her house and journeys alone by bus to Shadow Point, a place from her past.

In John Macmurray's words the 'self as agent' provides the central themes for existentialism while Descartes concentrated attention on the 'self as subject'. Probably all the existentialists pay lip-service to the truth that man exists as a person only in a community of persons. But mainly they are concerned with the individual whose quest for authentic selfhood focuses on the meaning of personal being. It is through free and responsible decisions that man becomes authentically himself. The concern for the individual human life is the foundation of the philosophy of existentialism:

'To be a person is to exist in the mode, not of being, but of becoming, and what a person becomes is on personality, the product of his will, even if this is something he does not want to confront and seeks to conceal from himself. Every individual can be held to be aware –whether actually or potentially of a tension between his current conception of his condition and the presence of alternatives that are in some sense available to him; there is not a living being who does not secretly harbour an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony... an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself. (Macmurray 22)

Thus existentialism can be called a philosophy of modern man, where man is revealed in the condition of his thoroughness on the thorns of life. For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict. Man in the present day world is in a situation of despair. He is lonely, anguished and always lives his life in the all-pervading shadow of nothingness. Man will have to search out the meaning of life in such a world, where there is no hope and where Nietzsche had said, 'God is dead' (Macquarrie 56). Existentialist philosophers have drawn the picture of such a man. They also try to show how man can move towards his destiny of authenticity through an uninterrupted bitter struggle. For him, the relation of eternal fidelity between an individual subject and the transcendent Absolute, God is the ground of humanism. Some scholars argue that the term should be used only to refer to the cultural movement in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s associated with the works of the philosophers Jean Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. Other scholars extend the term to Kierkegaard, and yet others extend it as far back as Socrates.

Existentialism is a term that belongs to intellectual history like 'rationalism' and 'empiricism'. The rejection of reason as the source of meaning is a common theme of existentialism. It is the source for the feeling of anxiety and dread that the individual feels in the face of radical freedom and in the awareness of death. Kierkegaard sees rationality as a mechanism humans use to counter their existential anxiety, their fear of being in the world. It can be thought of as the twentieth-century analogue of nineteenth-century romanticism. The two movements have in common the demand that the whole fabric of life be recognized and taken into account of human thinking and acting. As such, they express a form of resistance to reductionist analyses of life and its meaning for human beings. But there are also significant differences. Existentialism is typically focused on, individual human lives and the poignant inevitability of suffering and choice for each individual whereas romanticism tended to be more oriented.

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